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SUBJECT: STAFFDEL MEACHAM AND TOON MEET WITH MOGJ GOLCHER

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) "The United States is Panama's strategic partner of choice on security issues, but Panama needs additional resources to strengthen its security infrastructure," Minister of Government and Justice Olga Golcher told STAFFDEL Meacham and Toon on October 18. Golcher lauded the bilateral relationship while discussing areas for improvement and outlined ongoing GOP projects including the planned development of a Panamanian Coast Guard, programs to fight trafficking in persons, and assistance to refugees. End summary.

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A "Special" Relationship  
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¶2. (SBU) Golcher emphasized the "special" relationship between Panama and the United States, and the U.S. Embassy in particular, at the meeting, also attended by MOGJ Secretary General Danilo Toro and EMBOFFs. She said the Torrijos Administration had a particularly strong relationship with the United States that "couldn't be better," especially in cooperation on security, counterterrorism, and counternarcotics issues. Nevertheless, Golcher stated several times both Panama's need for funding and resources on these issues and the GOP's hope to strengthen the relationship further, making an appeal for continued USG assistance as a key component of the bilateral relationship.

¶3. (SBU) In response to a question on how Panama's purported neutrality would affect the bilateral relationship, however, Golcher cautiously replied that the GOP understood the need for the Canal to be neutral while also understanding the reality of the security environment. "Respecting neutrality does not mean not recognizing threats," Golcher said. Toro quickly added that Panama saw the United States as its first choice in strategic partnership.

¶4. (SBU) Toro then outlined three areas to help strengthen U.S.-Panamanian cooperation: maintaining the level of cooperation without interference from internal politics and processes; additional USG assistance on capacity building; and improving communications and information flow. He added that access to timely information and compatible technology for security systems were essential.

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15. (SBU) Golcher used the GOP's proposed plan to build a Coast Guard as an example of Panama's need to invest in public forces and the need for resources to make such investment happen. She said the proposed Coast Guard was ideal for the country's security needs, adding that the current system was antiquated and not suitable for what Panama required.

16. (SBU) On trafficking-in-persons, Golcher said the GOP was developing procedures and guidelines for the repatriation of child victims trafficked into Panama. She emphasized that the number of trafficking victims overall in Panama, as well as the number of victims of Panamanian nationality, was very small. Panama was also working with other Central American countries, with the help of Spanish and Italian consultants, to create a map of major trafficking routes in the region. The map would help countries involved in the fight against this illicit trafficking to be more vigilant on these routes, Golcher said.

17. (SBU) On refugees, Golcher was optimistic that the refugee intake system in Panama was working well. She mentioned the summer arrival of a group of displaced indigenous fleeing the conflict in Colombia, saying that Panama's refugee commission would soon make a decision on their final status. Golcher said the option of third country resettlement was important, particularly in the case of Cubans who did not really qualify as refugees.

18. (SBU) Overall, Golcher and Toro were very interested in the staffers' questions and focused on the need to continue to improve the strong bilateral relationship. They were receptive to the staffers' emphasis on the bipartisan nature of the Senate's work on security issues as well as the need for a multinational approach.

19. (U) This cable has been cleared by Carl Meacham and Bernard Toon.

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